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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001927

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR D, SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA, EUR/NB  
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [SOCI](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Amid tentative signs that the President may have miscalculated, questions arise about her motives

Refs: (A) Colombo 1918 (E) Colombo 1902

- (B) Colombo 1917 (F) Colombo 1893  
- (C) Colombo 1916 (G) Colombo 1867  
- (D) Oslo 2293 (H) Colombo 1684

(U) Classified by Charge' d'Affaires James F. Entwistle.  
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: As the dust begins to settle after President Kumaratunga's rapid-fire November 4-5 moves against the UNP government, speculation abounds as to what her true motives are. She and her supporters say she only wants to protect Sri Lanka's "national interest." There are strong indications, however, that she is acting out of spite toward the PM because he is getting all of the credit for the peace process. Whatever the mix of reasons for her moves, there are very tentative signs that the President may have miscalculated, including: the PM's coalition seems to be holding together; the international community is expressing concern about the possible impact on the peace process; and there are worries about the effect on the economy. Despite the bad reviews, the President -- a fiercely proud person with a volatile personality -- does not appear set to back down anytime soon and she may hit out some more. END SUMMARY.

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Defending the President's Actions  
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2. (C) As the dust begins to settle after President Kumaratunga's rapid-fire November 4-5 decisions to fire ministers, suspend Parliament, and declare an emergency, speculation abounds as to what her true motives are. In answering this question, she and her supporters have been unwavering that the President's only focus has been to protect Sri Lanka's "national interest." Elaborating on this theme in her nationally televised speech on November 4, the President stated:

"The disturbing developments of the past few months culminating in the events of the last days and the ineffective steps taken by the administration to ensure national security have led me to take the view that firm and steadfast action is necessary to remedy this situation."

3. (C) In comments made at a press conference on November 5, Lakshman Kadirgamar, a key adviser, made a similar claim that the president was only interested in protecting Sri Lanka's "national security." The President made the same point to the Charge' in their meeting late November 5 (see Ref A). While their public comments have been somewhat vague as to what exactly they are protecting the country against, most observers believe that the President and her supporters are referring to concerns about the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The President and her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) have made clear, for example, that they are bitterly opposed to the Tigers' October 31 proposal regarding the possible formation of an interim administration in the north/east (see Ref F). In explaining her steps during her meeting with the Charge', the President directly stated that she thought that Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's government had turned a "blind eye" to Tiger activities and transgressions of the ceasefire accord. These views are not new: the President and her supporters have been skeptical about the PM's peace initiative virtually since its inception in December 2001 and have on numerous occasions made these views public (see Ref G).

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Indications that it is Personal  
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4. (C) While underscoring these concerns about the security situation, the President and her supporters have vociferously denied that she might have any selfish or narrowly partisan reasons for her actions. In her

November 4 speech, the president stated, for example: "This is not an effort against any party or individual but done only in the exercise of the duties and responsibilities bestowed on me under the Constitution." There are strong indications, however, that she is acting out of spite toward the PM. The President has had a bitter relationship with Prime Minister Wickremesinghe for years. They do not get along for many reasons: their personal chemistry is awful; they are of different political persuasions; they each come from political dynasties that have opposed each other since even before the country gained independence in 1948, etc.

15. (C) Given their horrific relationship, many neutral observers believe that the President is deeply jealous that the PM is getting the credit for the peace process, and, through her recent moves, is trying to put him in his place. In choosing to take her actions at this time, for example, the President may well have been trying to embarrass the Prime Minister right before his November 5 meeting with President Bush. The depth of her anger toward the PM was also evident during her meeting with the Ambassador in late September (see Ref H) and in her November 5 meeting with the Charge'. In both of these meetings, the President launched into harangues about the PM's alleged perfidy over the years. All of these indicators tend to flag that the President's motives are very personal, in addition to being policy-related as she and her supporters claim.

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Tentative Signs of Miscalculation  
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16. (C) Whatever her true motives are, there are early signs that the President may have miscalculated if she thought that she would easily win in a confrontation with the PM. Although the signs are still very tentative, the domestic and international political landscape for the President appears to be growing less favorable to her position in the following ways:

-- A Resilient PM: Although initially caught flatfooted by the President's moves, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's coalition government seems to be holding together for now. As reported in Septel, the PM's supporters have reportedly collected the signatures of up to 130 MPs who state that they support his government. This figure is significantly above the 113 MPs needed to form a majority in the 225-seat Parliament. While there continue to be strong indications that the President is working to encourage defectors, there is little indication as of yet that she has had any success. At the same time, based on most reports, the Prime Minister, who was quite popular before this crisis began, appears to be picking up sympathy from the public over what is seen as the President's overbearing ways. In addition, there are signs the public is worried that the President may be placing the nearly two-year old ceasefire at risk through her actions. The PM's apparent reservoir of popular strength bodes well if there are parliamentary elections soon, which is where events appear to be headed. Moreover, the Prime Minister has managed all of this so far while being out of the country (he will be returning from the U.S. the morning of November 7). It is quite possible that when he returns to Sri Lanka on November 7 he and his supporters may be able to take the offensive against the President through press conferences and rallies, etc.

-- Unfavorable International Climate: The President also may not have counted on the generally unfavorable international reaction she has faced. The U.S., the EU, Japan, and India have all expressed concern over the situation and the possible harm that might result to the peace process. If she was planning to disrupt the PM's meeting with President Bush, Kumaratunga also failed; the Oval Office meeting went off without a hitch. The statement by the Indian government, the regional "superpower," was particularly damaging to Kumaratunga: "We are surprised at the sudden political developments in Sri Lanka. We hope that the situation does not provoke a constitutional crisis, which would impact on political stability and the ongoing peace process."

-- Economic Concerns: Though presidential spokesmen have been vocal in trying to reassure the private sector and investors, the President seems oblivious to the notion that implementing a state of emergency on national security grounds will have an impact on how Sri Lanka is viewed by potential customers and investors. Sri Lanka has worked hard for the past two years to focus attention on the peace process and the absence of war. It is possible that many potential sources of

capital will link the last 48 hours with pre-peace process Sri Lanka, thus reinforcing perceptions of the country as a volatile, violent, politically unstable place.

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COMMENT  
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17. (C) All in all, the President is earning some pretty bad reviews for her actions. In taking the steps she has and assessing the ramifications, however, it is questionable whether the President is receiving accurate information. Kumaratunga is in a bit of a cocoon, which is partly due to very real security concerns and partly of her own choosing. One aspect of this is that she is not out and about meeting new people and seeing things first hand. Rather, she appears highly reliant on a small network of supporters who basically seem to tell her only what she wants to hear. Her supporters, for example, may be telling her that her party can win elections, a proposition that most observers see as doubtful. Armed with information that she thinks is reliable, but may well be flawed, Kumaratunga -- a fiercely proud person with a volatile personality -- does not appear set to back down anytime soon. In fact, she may well hit out some more. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

ENTWISTLE